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Fair competition in the corset and brassiere industry, 1933-1935

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Since the beginning of the twentieth century, ethical and social responsibility concerns such as employment and pay discrimination, child labor, and sweatshop conditions have attracted public attention in the textiles and apparel manufacturing industry (Blowfield, 1999). The corset and brassiere manufacturing industry, like other branches of the apparel field during the 1930s, was characterized by an oversupply of merchandise and ruthless competition between manufactures and retailers. This competition often resulted in low wages, long working hours, unfair trade practices and no spirit of cooperation (McMillan, 1933). Efforts toward establishing criteria of ethical practice to confront demoralizing business practices were made through the formation of the National Recovery Act (NRA), Code of Fair Competition.

The purpose of this study was to explore the practice of fair competition in the corset and brassiere industry during the time of the NRA. Other researchers have analyzed the workings of the code within the women's dress manufacturing industry (Marcketti, 2010). This paper explores the trends in employment, wages and labor hours during the 1930s as well as the key issues discussed, debated, and finally approved in the corset code. Finally, public opinion towards the code was analyzed.

Sources used for this study included the governmental hearings on the codes of fair practices and competition discussed by apparel industry executives, representatives from labor, and consumers. To understand employment trends in the corset and brassiere manufacturing industry, data of 1930 and 1940 were collected from the United States Census Bureau. *The New York Times*, *Women's Wear Daily* and the *Department Store Journal* were searched to ascertain public opinion and discussion regarding the code in the corset and brassiere industry.

Under the auspices of the NRA, the Code of Fair Competition in the corset and brassiere industry was approved Aug. 14, 1933 and effective Aug. 28, 1933 (Kops, 1933). The purpose of the code was to increase employment, establish fair and adequate wages, and eliminate wasteful practices destructive to the interests of the public, employees and employers (The new constitution under which corset and brassiere industry will soon operate, 1933). Once approved, the codes regulated the age of employment, wages and conditions of employment, and hours of labor and operation. In addition to these rules which were similar to the women's dress manufacturing industry code, the corset and brassiere code also regulated advertising and display forms, the number of demonstrations of products in retail outlets, returns and consignment policies, sanitary



requirements for factories creating goods, and design piracy (Hearing on the code of fair practices, 1933).

Based on a review of the popular and trade press of *The New York Times*, *Women's Wear Daily*, and *Department Store Journal*, it became clear that the public paid tremendous attention to the wages and hours standards, child labor, and payment discrimination between gender and sweatshop condition (More trade groups back NRA policies, 1935; Jobs under codes put at 10,000,000; Hits pay discrimination, 1933). The prohibition of unfair competition in advertising, piracy, and the need for goods to be produced in sanitary factories seemed to particularly draw the public's attention (Producers' codes change practices, 1933; Advertising rule in 10 of 29 codes, 1933; Design protection gains in many lines, 1934; Business notes, 1934). However, the codes were not supported by everyone. Some industry executives believed the codes caused over-regulation within the apparel industry and were not workable, especially for small business (Corset makers ask code change, 1934). An understanding of the considerations unique to the corset and brassiere code, particularly piracy, truth in advertising, and rules regarding retailing provide additional understanding of this aspect of the apparel industry during the 1930s.

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